

FEMALE TERRORISTS AND EXTREMISTS: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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## ABSTRACT

What are the characteristics of female terrorists and extremists? What are the factors and drivers that lend to their decisions to join or attempt to join a terrorist organization or carry out a terrorist attack? While modern studies in terrorism have begun looking at females, the literature is still often limited. Studies are rarely comparative or cross-regional and tend to focus on specific roles. Much of the literature is also allocated towards understanding the media's perception of female terrorists as well as the phenomenon of suicide bombers. Case studies of 41 females from the Counter Extremism Project, Terrorist and Extremism Database (TED) were analyzed using descriptive statistics and content analysis to explore the characteristics of female terrorists and extremists. This study also looked at how the media portrayed these female terrorists and extremists.

This study was read and reviewed by Dr. Joana Cook and Cindy Storer.

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## INTRODUCTION:

Sun Tzu has famously said, “know your enemy and know yourself; in a hundred battles you will never be in peril.” It is therefore crucial to understand the mind of a terrorist to effectively counter them. The research question for this study is: *What characteristics do female terrorists and extremists between 2000 and 2020 have?*

In the broader literature on terrorism, group dynamics, group leaders, group strategies and tactics, are crucial factors in understanding terrorist and extremist groups. These factors, however, can be understood by looking at the individuals inside the groups. Understanding the characteristics of the individuals may be at the heart of understanding terrorism.

Until the twentieth century, the literature on terrorism was predominantly male-focused. 20<sup>th</sup>-century scholarship had to play catch-up by adding gender studies to terrorism studies, and there are still many gaps that can be filled. In the following section, an overview of the existing literature will focus on the broader understanding of terrorism and radicalization, and the specific literature on women in terrorism. The literature review will highlight the existing gaps.

This study is important because while female terrorists are now less of an anomaly, the current scholarship is still often limited to specific regions, group affiliation, roles, or types of violence. Case studies of 41 female terrorists and extremists will be analyzed to fill in those gaps. This dataset is cross-regional, does not focus on one terrorist or extremist group, and includes various roles and characteristics. Because of the robustness of the dataset, this study adds to the field of female terrorists and extremists and may have implications for policymakers.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The following overview of the existing literature will begin by defining terrorism, followed by an examination of the broader literature of terrorism without particular focus on gender. Then, a closer look at the literature focusing on female terrorism will be analyzed. This section will also focus on media portrayal, discussion of female suicide bombers, other roles, and lastly, the gaps in the existing studies.

### **Definition**

To understand female terrorists and extremists, definitions need to be established. However, there is no one working definition of terrorism which makes it difficult to classify terrorism across the board. Vergani explains that the “ambiguity of key terms such as radicalization and extremism, which by their very nature identify a relative position on a continuum of opinions and behaviors.”<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this study, Galvan’s definition of terrorism will be adopted: “acts and events systematically propagandized for the purpose of instilling massive fear in individuals and/or the public at large, and which are deliberately used for coercive purposes. Terrorists are those who engage in those activities, whatever form they take.”<sup>2</sup> For extremism, the FBI definition will be utilized: “encouraging, condoning, justifying, or supporting the commission of a violent act to achieve political, ideological, religious, social, or economic goals.”<sup>3</sup> These definitions were chosen to encompass terrorist and extremism broadly in terms of region, roles, or motivations.

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<sup>1</sup> Vergani, et al., 2018

<sup>2</sup> Galvin, 1983

<sup>3</sup> FBI, ‘What is Violent Extremism’

## **Broader Scholarship on Terrorism (Gender Not Accounted For)**

The understanding of the psychology of terrorists has shifted over the years. John Horgan gives an extensive overview of the ‘individual approaches’ in his book *The Psychology of Terrorism*. Chapter three explores the psyche of those who are radicalized.<sup>4</sup> In the 1970s, terrorists were characterized as having psychopathic tendencies. This belief stemmed from the idea that “psychopaths lack remorse or guilt for his/her activities and a selfish, egotistical world view that precludes any genuine welfare for others.”<sup>5</sup> Corrado, a leading scholar on the mental state of terrorists, argues that “the true terrorist must steel himself against tenderheartedness through a fierce faith in his credo or by a blessed retreat into a comforting, individual madness.”<sup>6</sup> However, some basic characteristics of terrorists, contradict the traits of psychopaths. The main difference, that psychopaths usually do not accept social construction, while terrorists do. Horgan highlights that a “terrorist motivation is overwhelmingly and inseparably linked to a need to ‘belong’ to the group (any group will do it seems, and if the opportunity arises, the terrorist group will do) and ‘hence’ the group becomes central to identity formation in the terrorist.”<sup>7</sup>

In the 1980s and 90s, personality traits of terrorists were attributed to narcissism and paranoia. However, scholars such as Corrado found no evidence of psychological abnormalities, and many other studies such as Lyons and Harbinson, supported this.<sup>8</sup>

Another popular theory was the frustration-aggression hypothesis (FAH); terrorism as a

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<sup>4</sup> Horgan, 2005, Chapter 3

<sup>5</sup> Horgan 2005, 49

<sup>6</sup> Corrado, 1981, 293— 309

<sup>7</sup> Horgan 2005, 61

<sup>8</sup> Corrado, 1981; Lyons and Harbinson, 1986

response to frustration, or blockage of attainment of one's personal or environmental goals.<sup>9</sup> This theory was often criticized for its transfer from terrorism in the individual context to the collective group, and as Horgan echoes, is limited as a theory to explain terrorism.<sup>10</sup>

Scholars such as Ferracuti argue that terrorists are 'not normal' and are "characterized by a specific, finite set of trait behaviors."<sup>11</sup> However, most of the modern literature suggests that terrorists, especially politically motivated, tend to be normal individuals. The reason they do not feel remorse, argue scholars such as Horgan, is because they rationalize their actions and believe they are fighting for a righteous cause.<sup>12</sup> This may explain why terrorists were initially characterized as psychopaths lacking remorse because they deemed their violence as necessary and justifiable.

The differing theories are broken down into two theoretical frameworks. According to Horgan, the theories that look at the psychological differences in terrorists, falls under the positivist school of thought which looks at "influences outside the realm of free will [which] offer a more sensible approach to viewing the criminal. These influences were to be found, positivists argued, by looking at biological, sociological and psychological factors (e.g. genetics, environment and personality, respectively) or any combination of two or more of these."<sup>13</sup> Positivism aims to counter another theoretical framework, 'rational theory' which suggests engagement in terrorism is done through a

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<sup>9</sup> Berkowitz, 1965 (as cited in Horgan 2005)

<sup>10</sup> Merari and Friedland (as cited in Horgan 2005)

<sup>11</sup> Ferracuti, 1982 (As cited in Horgan, 2005, p 65)

<sup>12</sup> Horgan, 2005; Silke, 1998

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

rational process “of judging whether the expected results of engagement in crime outweigh the consequences of the punishment that would follow if apprehended.”<sup>14</sup>

Randy Borum highlights four observable stages of radicalization in ‘Understanding the Terrorist Mind-Set.’ First, he explains, the individual identifies an undesirable event or condition whether it be economical, social, etc. The individual then frames this as “injustice”, and then proceeds to identify a potential target that can be blamed for the injustice. Finally, this individual or entity responsible for the injustice is deemed as evil, justifying any violence towards the target.<sup>15</sup>

Vergani et al., in a more recent study, identify three Ps of radicalization: push, pull, and personal factors. Push factors include structural root causes such as state repression, deprivation, and poverty. Pull factors are factors that would explain why extremism and terrorism are appealing to the individual. This includes ideology, group belonging, group mechanics, and incentives. Lastly, personal factors are what makes the individual more vulnerable to radicalization than their peers: trauma, psychological disorders, and personality traits.<sup>18</sup>

### **The literature on female terrorism**

The studies and frameworks discussed above do not take gender into account. The literature on female terrorism starts to narrow down.

Matusitz and Berisha provide four common theories of female terrorists: Albert Bandura’s Social Learning Theory, Edwin Sutherland’s Differential association theory (DAT), Robert Agnew’s General Strain Theory (GST), and Rational Choice Theory

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Borum, 2003

<sup>18</sup> Vergani et al., 2018



(RCT).<sup>19</sup> They apply Social Learning Theory to explain why females might be more susceptible to radicalization. Using ISIS as a case study, they argue that “the ISIS community plays a crucial role in fostering a learning environment, whether physical or online, leading to this process.”<sup>20</sup> This is consistent with many other studies about the Islamic State.<sup>21</sup> The Social learning theory also mirrors the broader literature on terrorism by explaining how through societal rules, or laws, women may be taught to rationalize the dehumanization of ‘infidels’ or ‘apostates’, thus rationalizing acts of terrorism.

Differential association theory (DAT) which presumes that individuals learn criminal behavior through social interactions. This theory also explains how an individual may rationalize terrorism. Robert Agnew’s General Strain Theory (GST) theorizes that criminal behavior is more likely when there are certain stressors. This coincides with much of the literature on push, pull and personal factors of radicalization.<sup>22</sup> Lastly, Rational Choice Theory (RCT), which has been discussed extensively in the previous section, explains that collective social behavior is produced via the behavior of individual actors, and those actors are rational beings, aware of their choices and actions.

### **Media Portrayal of Female Terrorists**

The media portrayal of females who join terrorist or extremist groups are often skewed, misrepresented, and lends to difficulty in truly understanding them. This is important to recognize as it often frames them incorrectly which gets translated into the literature, scholarship, and ultimately, policies.

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<sup>19</sup> Matusitz et al., Chapter 3

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p 38

<sup>21</sup> Horgan, 2005; Silk, 1998; Borum, 2003

<sup>22</sup> Vergani et al., 2018

While women are active members of terrorist groups, with estimates ranging from 20- 30 percent membership, they are still portrayed as anomalies. Nacos explains that this occurs because “whenever women commit acts of terror, most people react with an extra level of shock and horror.”<sup>23</sup> The way the media drives female involvement in terrorism is two- fold: first, it is inaccurate and casts female terrorists as less dangerous; hence, it creates a strategic advantage for groups to recruit females. The disconnect between the reality and the agenda that the media sets forth makes it difficult to accurately detect and counter female radicalization. Second, because utilizing females garners more attention, terrorist groups recognize their “propaganda value.”<sup>24</sup> Sjoberg and Gentry have found that when women commit acts of terror, their sex is much more of a discussion than when men do and that “in stories of women terrorists, the perpetrators are often described as women first and as terrorists second.”<sup>25</sup>

To take it even further, Nacos suggests that the media coins names such as “black widows”, to frame the female Chechen terrorists as a “vengeance-seeking widow who becomes a terrorist because her husband was killed by Russian troops—a woman with a strong personal rather than political motive,” which further skews the reality of female terrorist motivations.<sup>27</sup> This creates a gender skewed perception that even when females are involved in the politics of the groups, their true motivations lie with personal motivations such as family ties and revenge. Similarly, referring to female ISSI members as “jihadi bride” creates the romantic notion of women joining the Islamic States for the prospect of finding a husband. While case studies of females being recruited by romantic

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<sup>23</sup> Nacos, 2005, 435-51.

<sup>24</sup> Bloom, 2011, 7.

<sup>25</sup> Sjoberg and Gentry, 2016

<sup>27</sup> Nacos 2005, 440

lovers or marrying IS members are not uncommon, naming them Jihadi Brides frames the motive in a narrowed, gendered lens.

### **Female Suicide Bombers**

The literature on female terrorism may be limited as it often focuses solely on suicide bombing.<sup>29</sup> While literature on suicide bombing is vast, for the sake of this paper, it will not be reviewed as it is too lengthy and not what this study aims to focus on.

Between 1985 and 2006, there have been more than 220 female suicide bombers and the numbers have only increased with time.<sup>30</sup> In fact, “from April 11, 2011, to June 30, 2017, Boko Haram deployed 434 bombers to 247 different targets during 238 suicide-bombing attacks. At least 56% of these bombers were women and at least 81 bombers were specifically identified as children or teenagers.”<sup>31</sup> Whether this says more about Boko Haram’s tactic of using females as suicide bombers, or about the female suicide bombers themselves, is unclear. The number, however, is noteworthy because between 2014 and 2019, majority of the suicide bombings are accredited to Boko Haram.<sup>32</sup>

One common explanation for a terrorist group’s utilization of female suicide bombers is the powerful propaganda value as it garners more attention. In this case, the media is not conducting the framing, but the group is controlling the media; a strategic tactic that is often successful.<sup>33</sup> Sawicki argues that “suicide bombing used to be a disturbing phenomenon. It has become so common that now it is the phenomenon of

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<sup>29</sup> Speckhard 2008; Patel 2017; Warner and Maffess, 2017; Brunner, 2005; Alacok 2020; Jacques & Taylor, 2008; Schweitzer, 2006; Turner, 2016; Alexander 2017

<sup>30</sup> Speckhard 2008, 1025

<sup>31</sup> Warner & Maffess 2017, IV

<sup>32</sup> Global Terrorism Index 2019, 5

<sup>33</sup> Turner, (2016), 15-19

women and children as the human bombs that causes remarks.”<sup>34</sup> Women offer a tactical advantage as suicide bombers as they are less suspicious and can reach a target with less suspicion.<sup>35</sup>

Speckhard argues that what motivates females to join terrorist groups as suicide bombers is not significantly different from what motivates their male counterparts, and while trauma is a major personal motivation, it does not make them psychologically abnormal..<sup>36</sup> Other motivations include revenge on behalf of their husbands, as well as a sense of empowerment, a seemingly gendered explanation to the motivations of female suicide bombers. Patel links martyrdom with postpartum depression and psychosis, corresponding to the literature on psychodynamics of terrorists, but that a lack of societal support, as well as gender suppression, may explain this link further.<sup>37</sup> Patel also explores how women are 3rd class citizens in Islamic communities, and therefore, there tends to be more community support for female martyrs.<sup>38</sup> However, this explanation is limited to explaining Islamic female martyrs specifically. On the other hand, scholars such as Peresin and Cervone argue that “women have no fewer motives than men for engaging in jihad. They share the same political motives and may have additional personal reasons to seek revenge, as the loss of their male relatives or the violation of their honor.”<sup>39</sup> The narratives often contradict each other and tend to focus on limiting factors.

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<sup>34</sup> Sawicki, 2016

<sup>35</sup> Turner, 2016, 16; Speckhard, 2008, 1027; Alexander, 2017, 195; Peresin & Cervone, 2015; Kleinsmith, 2015

<sup>36</sup> Speckhard, 2008, 1023

<sup>37</sup> Patel, 2017, 85.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 89

<sup>39</sup> Peresin and Cervone, 2015, 497

## Other Roles for Females

While a lot of attention is allocated to female suicide bombers, females have many other roles in terrorist groups. The assumption that female terrorists are limited in their roles stems from gender stereotypes.<sup>40</sup> Alexander, while focusing only on female jihadists particularly in America, identifies their contributions as: plotters, those who have an active role in designing, attempting or carrying out terrorist attacks; supporters, those who collect support, and propagate information; and travelers, those who migrate outside of the US to participate.<sup>41</sup> Women have many roles ranging from auxiliary and non-combative, to foreign fighters. The difficulty in forming a typology is that roles of female terrorists often fluctuate and differ between regions and groups. In fact, women tend to have active roles in combat or leadership, in all rebel groups.<sup>42</sup> Cunningham has found in her cross regional study on female terrorists that women tend to be more politically active in leftist organizations and Kleinsmith suggests that women tend to take on more leadership roles in leftist groups too.<sup>43</sup> Women are particularly successful as recruiters and propagandists, with ISIS especially, networking and recruiting online on higher levels than males.<sup>44</sup>

While many themes and factors arise when looking at the literature of female terrorists, the challenge is that they vary between regions, roles, and types of group (i.e. political/ideological). Peresin and Cervone find that the most prominent motivation is ideological.<sup>45</sup> However, that is focused predominantly on Western foreign fighters. A

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<sup>40</sup> Alexander 2016; Bloom 2011

<sup>41</sup> Alexander, 2016

<sup>42</sup> Henshaw 2016; Cunningham 2013

<sup>43</sup> Cunningham, 2013; Kleinsmith, 2015

<sup>44</sup> Manrique et al., 2016

<sup>45</sup> Peresin and Cervone, 2015, 500

common motivations for male Western foreign fighters include financial incentives, but is not prominent amongst ISIS women according to their study.<sup>46</sup> Perhaps this is because a lot of the women who join groups such as ISIS do come from well-off families, hence, the financial aspect may not tempt that as much as their male counterparts. On the other hand, while female Boko Haram members primarily also join for ideological reasons, freedom, and resources such as Koranic education, in Nigeria, 4 percent of girls are unable to finish secondary school, creating a push factor that may not exist for Western women.<sup>47</sup> For women in the Western Balkans who join the conflicts in Syria and Iraq, motivations vary from socio-economic conditions, ideological views, family relations, identity crises, and trauma.<sup>48</sup> In an examination of cross- regional female terrorists, Cunningham found that Algerian women join for the same political objectives as men, however, for women, it is coupled with other pull factors such as poverty.<sup>49</sup>

Furthermore, in a patriarchal society such as in the Western Balkans, women may join groups such as ISIS because they are following their husbands' orders.<sup>50</sup> This heightens the gendered lens on why women would join terrorist groups and makes away with their own personal motivations by solely victimizing them and making away with political motivations. Furthermore, not all female terrorists join voluntarily. Boko Haram, for instance, is notorious for their kidnappings, forcing young women to join, marry, or martyr themselves for the group. Because of their young ages, many are not aware of what they are in fact doing.<sup>51</sup> However, it is crucial not to make away with the true

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 500

<sup>47</sup> Bigio & Vogelstein 2019, 4

<sup>48</sup> Kelmendi, 2019, 23

<sup>49</sup> Cunningham 2003, 175

<sup>50</sup> Kelmendi, 2019, 22

<sup>51</sup> Warner & Maffess 2017, IV

motivations of those who voluntarily join terrorist groups, or the literature will continue to reflect gender stereotypes and counterterrorism measures will reflect those gaps.

### **Limitations**

As an overview of the literature focusing on female terrorism has highlighted, much of the studies focus on limited factors. Some focus particularly on Jihadist groups and some focus only on Western female foreign fighters. A lot of the scholarship is also very regionally focused. Even those that are cross regional such as Cunningham's study, focus mostly on political violence. It is difficult to derive a comprehensive understanding of female terrorists when the datasets are limited in factors such as regions and groups. Even the three studies that were found to be comprehensive and comparative, have its limitations. Yon & Milton examined the differences between male and female terrorists across different ideological groups. However, their database was limited to Western women. Jacques, K., & Taylor's study, while a strong comparative analysis utilizing biographical accounts of 30 females and 30 males, is limited to suicide bombing. Jacques, K., & Taylor look at a larger dataset of 222 female perpetrators and 269 males and it looks at the broader trends in terrorism. As the authors note, however, it is limited in the sense that the male sample was not exactly a match to the female sample.

### **METHODS AND DATA**

As this is an exploratory research study, no hypothesis was necessary. The aim of this study was to create a preliminary and inductive understanding of the characteristics of female terrorists and extremists and see what missing gaps in the existing scholarship can be filled in. To guard against bias, the research question is very open-ended. To fill in some of the missing gaps highlighted in the literature review, this study aimed to be

exploratory. It does not seek to prove or disprove any existing theory or assumptions of female terrorist and extremists, but rather to explore the characteristics that are found amongst this sample.

This study used secondary research methods by taking a case study approach. Because of the sensitive nature of terrorism and extremism, this is a hard to reach and a ‘hidden population’, making interviews a non-viable option. As a basis, the Counter Extremism Project (CEP) Terrorist and Extremism Database (TED) “of extremist and terrorist leaders and operatives around the globe,” was used for the case studies.<sup>52</sup> The database has hundreds of profiles, but for this study, only the 41 female terrorists and extremists in the database have been analyzed.<sup>53</sup>

While eight of the case studies have very limited information as they are social media profiles such as Twitter users with unknown identities, they were included in this study to saturate the findings. Social media profiles in the database that were not 100% identifiable as females were not included.

While the 41 case studies are not a purposive sample, it has limitations since it is derived from the TED database. For instance, while the sample is not limited to one specific terrorist or extremist group, majority of the case studies align with Jihadist groups, with only one aligned with far-right extremism. However, as a preliminary and exploratory study, 41 case studies are considered non-trivial as it represents a wide range of factors with limited constraints. Furthermore, the risks are minimized as all the information used in this study are non- classified and publicly accessible.

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<sup>52</sup> TED, Counter Extremism Project, Nov. 10

<sup>53</sup> The names and photos of the case studies can be found in Appendix A



The first part of the analysis consists of descriptive statistics. Common characteristics and factors discussed in the existing literature were apparent in the profiles. Infogram, a data visualization platform, was utilized to quantify the characteristics, features, and general trends of the dataset. The factors that were quantified and used as ‘codes’ include: origin, group affiliation, roles and the three P’s. These factors were not predetermined. Rather, they were patterns found across the sample and used to analyze characteristics and features of female terrorists. Content analysis was implemented by utilizing interviews, news articles, and social media intelligence (SOCINT) for further saturation. The analysis and findings will be discussed in the following sections.

#### CODE DEFINITIONS AND EXPLANATIONS

One of the limitations in previous studies was the focus on specific groups. The strength of this sample is that it is cross regional and non-group specific, and it was therefore important to code for origin and group affiliation. As many of the subjects either traveled to Syria, escaped, are in hiding, or are deceased, their current residence was not coded for. The **origin** factor codes for the places that these individuals have become radicalized and does not include their immigration status as that is coded separately under push factors. **Group affiliation** accounts for which terrorist or extremist group the individuals joined or attempted to join. Much of the existing scholarship discusses the roles of female terrorists and whether they are only given traditional supporting roles, or if the landscape is changing. For this study, **combative roles** encompass *direct* roles such as the class foreign fighter, leadership, trainers, Hisba/enforcers, or other active military roles. **Non- combative roles** coded for propagandists, financiers/fundraisers, strictly

supportive roles such as Jihadi bride, and couriers. Rather than having an overlapping code for motivation, the three Ps: push, pull, and personal factors, were coded separately.

**Push factors** include characteristics such as state repression, poverty, lack of education, and immigration; factors that encompass structural root causes to radicalization. **Pull factors** focus on why terrorism or extremism may be attractive to the individual and includes ideology, Identity/spiritual longing/belonging/purpose, incentives (marriage and love), activism, and feminism. **Personal factors** coded for subject vulnerabilities such as a history of drugs and alcohol, loss, mental/psychological instability, abuse/rape, and rejection.

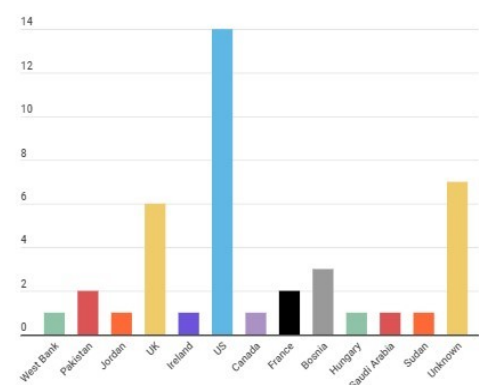
## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section will analyze the codes that were found amongst the sample and implemented graphs will explore them visually. It is important to highlight that due to the nature of this sample, much of the information is unknown. The ‘unknowns’ were not accounted for in the finding, hence, the findings are not always proportionate to the sample size.

### Origin

As portrayed in the graph, the women in the sample come from various locations. For this sample, the UK included Scotland, Northern Ireland, and England. While the UK and the US account for the largest locations of radicalization, a conclusive statement about recruitment hotspots is not possible since this is a small and non- representative sample.

Origin



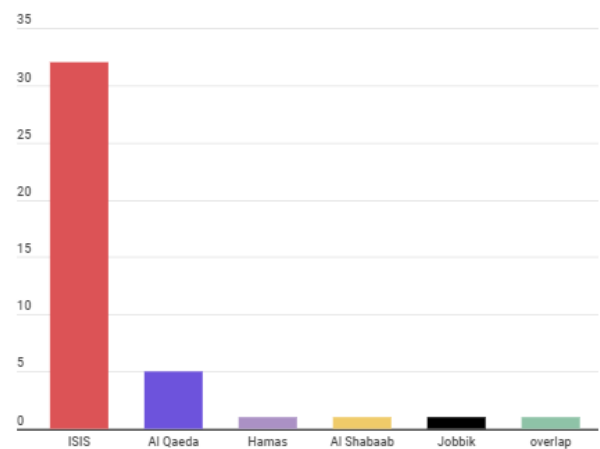
The strength of these findings, however, is that it is cross regional and non- purposeful; it does not focus on case studies from a specific region. The implications of western women being so prominent for female radicalization may be reflective of this sample only and needs further analysis.

### **Group Affiliation**

While the strength of this sample is that it is not purposive, the results show that majority were associated with ISIS.

The studies discussed in the literature review, while often much larger, purposely limited their samples to specific terrorists and extremist groups. When samples are group specific, the findings may be limited

**Group-affiliation**



because motivations are similar between members of the same groups and in this sample, majority are affiliated with jihadist groups, with only one tied to Jobbik, a far-right extremist group. The TED database is not limited to jihadists and accounts for 54 different groups ranging from jihadist groups, to the KKK, to the Russian Imperial Movement.<sup>54</sup> It is unclear why majority of the females in this database are jihadist and whether this is a significant pattern.

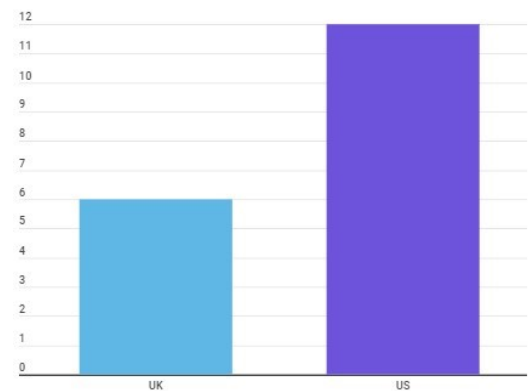
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<sup>54</sup> TED, Counter Extremism Project

However, this sample does look at various groups rather than focusing specifically on one, including: ISIS, Al Shabaab, Al Qaeda, Hamas, and Jobbik. The two affiliated with the Nusra Front were grouped together with Al Qaeda. One was associated with both ISIS and the Nusra Front.

Descriptive statistics highlights that the US and the UK case studies are predominantly associated with ISIS in this sample. This does not conclusively suggest that most female terrorists in the UK and the US are affiliated with ISIS. It can simply be reflective of this sample and may, in fact, limit the findings.

**ISIS Affiliation**



## **Roles**

According to the existing literature, traditionally, female terrorists were given supporting roles in their respective groups (especially in ideological groups). More recent studies, however, have suggested that women are given operational and active role. A large portion of the scholarship focus on female suicide bombers.

The role of suicide bombers was not found amongst this sample. However, through content analysis, the rhetoric from some of the females suggest that they would martyr themselves if given the opportunity. For instance, Heather Elizabeth Coffman, explained in an online conversation that suicide bombings are the “highest and best type of martyrdom,” and did believe it was her destiny to be a suicide bomber.<sup>55</sup> She further shared that “I wouldn’t go blow myself up here in the US because the battle isn’t here . . . but if I’m there the US army is there then Yes.”<sup>56</sup> While Coffman’s official role was a

<sup>55</sup> “United States of America v Heather Elizabeth Coffman

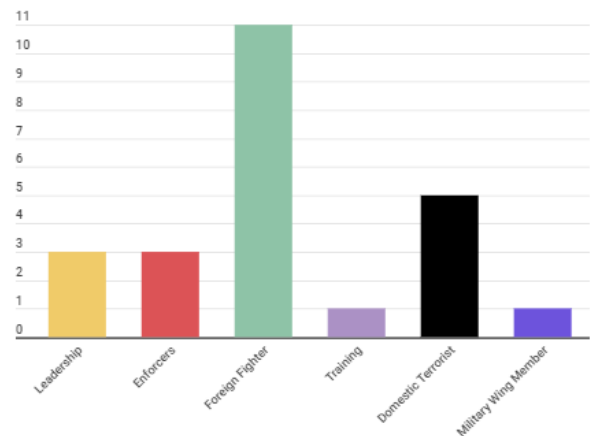
<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

propagandist and facilitator of ISIS, her rhetoric suggests that suicide bombing was an option. Similar characteristics were found for Safaa Boular. The MI5 bugged her family home and heard Safaa talking to her mother, wondering what it would be like to die as a martyr. She had downloaded pictures of suicide belts on her computer and even told the police that martyrdom appealed to her.<sup>57</sup> In fact, Safaa was planning a suicide bomb and gun attack on the British Museum after she failed to travel to Syria.<sup>58</sup> Because none of the women in this sample were characterized as suicide bombing, it is difficult to make a conclusive statement.

### **Combative Roles:**

Traditionally, as discussed in the literature review, women's roles in rightist terrorist groups are limited. However, findings did highlight characteristics of combative roles amongst the sample ranging from foreign fighters, military wing members, trainers, leaders and domestic terrorists.

### **Combative**



Ahlam Ahmad al-Tamimi, for instance, reached out to the Hamas Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades (the military wing), and became the first female member of Hamas's armed wing. She coordinated & aided the suicide bombing of the Sbarro pizzeria in Jerusalem. Before that, she placed an explosive device hidden in a beer can in a Jerusalem supermarket.

<sup>57</sup> White, "Teenager, Safaa Boular, found guilty."

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

While much of the literature argues that women are given leadership roles in leftist groups, Samantha Lewthwaite is believed to have had a leadership role in Al Shabab. While “she does not carry out attacks herself as she is too important but is responsible for many, many deaths-hundreds,” as one security chief claimed, “this lady sits at the right hand of the leader directing attacks.”<sup>59</sup>

Krisztina Morvai is characterized in a leadership role as she was a Member of the European Parliament (MEP). Sally Jones, too, became a leader, specifically for the “Anwar al-Awlaki” female battalion, an all (reportedly widowed) female ISIS cell (as portrayed in the photo to the right).<sup>60</sup> She also had a role in training female ISIS recruits from Europe on weapons and tactics for combat and suicide bombing.



The al-Khansaa Brigade, an all-female morality police brigade (Hisba) in Raqqa, is another way that females are active in groups such as ISIS. In this sample, Rawdah Abdisalaam is believed to have helped form the unit.<sup>61</sup> Aqsa Mahmood had a senior role in the al-Khansaa Brigade, enforcing Sharia law. Shamima Begum was also believed to be a member of the IS Hisba. Reports claim they have seen Begum holding automatic weapons and enforcing laws, and allegations have been made that she stitched suicide vests onto suicide bombers as they would have no choice but to detonate. However, in an interview she claimed, “they don’t have any evidence against me doing anything

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<sup>59</sup> Warnok, “Samantha Lewthwaite Today”

<sup>60</sup> Locket, “Jihadi Bride Sally Jones”

<sup>61</sup> Counter Extremism Project, “Rawdah Abdisalaam.”

dangerous. When I went to Syria I was just a housewife, the entire four years I stayed at home, took care of my husband, took care of my kids.”<sup>62</sup> Begum could very well have said this knowing that the assumption of female terrorists is their non- violent nature, and made a conscious decision to utilize traditional gender assumptions to portray herself as less of a threat. Nevertheless, because of the nature of terrorism and the secrecy surrounding it, confirmation of the true nature of her role is difficult to obtain.

It is also difficult to categorize what constitutes as a combative role. The classic typical assumption of combative roles are front line foreign fighters. However, just from this sample alone, other active roles such as Hisba, enforcers, and roles in other military wings are visible. The literature cannot assume females are only in non- combative and supporting roles because they are failing to see other combative roles rather than the traditional foreign fighter.

As this is a non- representative sample, valid statistics regarding combative roles cannot be determined. However, this sample does highlight characteristics of various active roles of female terrorists and extremists that can be further explored for more concrete findings.

### **Non- Combative Roles**

Non- combative roles such as propagandists, couriers, financiers/fundraisers, recruiters, and the traditional supporting roles of being wives, often referred to as ‘Jihadi brides’, were found in this sample.

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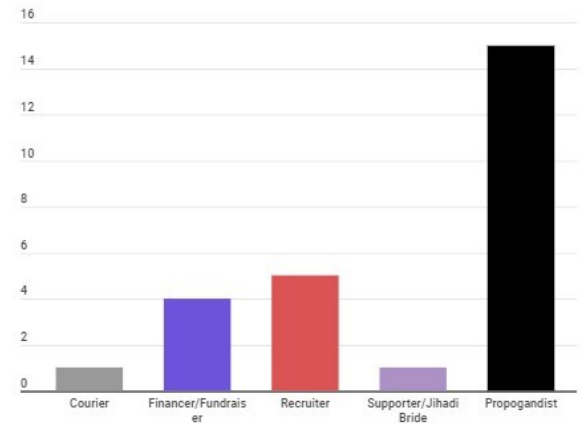
<sup>62</sup> Sky News, “IS Bride Shamima Begum Full Transcript”

This sample showed **propagandists** as a prominent supporting role. As discussed in the literature review, the media and internet are key tools for female propagandists. Some examples highlight such characteristics.

Aqsa Mahmood created a Tumblr blog where she shared advice and details on how female recruits can make hijrah (migration) to Syria. Ariel Bradley utilized twitter to propagandize her support of ISIS. In one post, she praised the attack on the two military bases in Chattanooga. The attack resulted in the death of four US Marines. Bradley tweeted: “Gifted this morning not only with Eid but w/ the news of a brother puttin fear n the heart of *kufar* [non-believers] n the city of my birth. *Alhamdullilah* [thanks be to God].”<sup>63</sup> Hayat Boudemine, in an interview, called for women to support ISIS: “My sisters, be bases of support and safety for your husbands, brothers, fathers, and sons. Be advisors to them. They should find comfort and peace with you. Do not make things difficult for them. Facilitate all matters for them.”<sup>64</sup>

Sally Jones propagated immensely via twitter. In one, she even threatens ed US military servicemen (see right).<sup>65</sup>

## Non-combative



<sup>63</sup> Hall, "How One Young Woman Went From Fundamentalist Christian To ISIS Bride."

<sup>64</sup> Zelin, "Al-Hayat Media Center Presents" (as cited in TED)

<sup>65</sup> Counter Extremism Project, "Sally Jones."



GreenBirdOfDabiq's identity, while unknown, does exist as a propagating figure, mainly using Twitter to disseminate Anti-West, gay, and pro-ISIS rhetoric. Similarly, Hallie Sheikh, a Twitter persona, propagates messages such as “#BaltimoreRiots is a sign that the prime of the US is going down the hill! You can't sustain people with manmade laws! #Time4Shariah,” and “Pt democracy will never bring world order which is why shariah must be implemented to bring order #BaltimoreRiots” which she tweeted in 2015, exploiting the racial tensions in Baltimore.<sup>66</sup>



Amal aka @BintRose52 turns to Twitter to propagate ISIS and denouncing Kuffar's (non-believers). She also exploits her ability to create new accounts when Twitter suspends her old ones. With each new profile she creates, she posts screenshots of her previous suspended domains. Under one of her Twitter admins, 'BintRose33\_' she tweeted: “Dear Admins, when do you finally get that we always come back, no matter how often you suspend our acc?!”<sup>67</sup>



<sup>66</sup> Counter Extremism Project, "Hallie Sheikh"

<sup>67</sup> Counter Extremism Project, "Amal aka @BintRose52"

Some of the females in this sample took on more than one role, oftentimes, propagandists doubling as recruiters. Aqsa Mahmood, for instance, is classified as a foreign fighter, propagandist, and recruiter. The image on the right portrays one of her Tumblr posts.<sup>68</sup> In addition to active social media platforms, Mahmood used her platforms to radicalize other individuals to join ISIS. It is believed that amongst those Mahmood radicalized and recruited was Shamima Begum, also a case study in this sample. Mahmood herself was a ‘bedroom radical’; influenced online. On one of her (now removed) Tumblr posts she wrote: “I urge all my sisters to come and gain true honour by living under the law of Shariah, by marrying a brother who puts Allah before his desires and by being in the forefront of this Islamic revival. Wallahi there is nothing more sad than sitting in the sidelines.”<sup>69</sup>



The propaganda disseminated by these women varies by each user. For instance, Bint Crackers, or @Umlittlecracker, does not Tweet propaganda that calls for violent acts, but rather, focuses on raising awareness to other radical accounts and promotes radical Islam and radical Islamic users on social media. As an example, in 2015 she Tweeted: “If you’re following me plz follow this sister @Bint\_Turki\_Z She makes the kuffar so angry that they could just go die in their rage.”<sup>70</sup>

Interestingly 100% of those who had a role as a propagandist were affiliated with ISIS. This may suggest that females tend to join ISIS because it offers them non-

<sup>68</sup> National Post, “Inside the life of a 20-year-old Scottish woman.”

<sup>69</sup> Counter Extremism Project, “Aqsa Mahmood.”

<sup>70</sup> Counter Extremism Project, “Bint Crackers.”

combative options, or it can simply mean that in this sample, majority of the females are affiliated with ISIS so the role of propagandists is proportionate to that. While these findings are not confirmatory, more research should be done to understand if the role of propagandist acts hand in hand with the role of recruiters. More in depth research with a larger sample should be conducted to understand these trends.

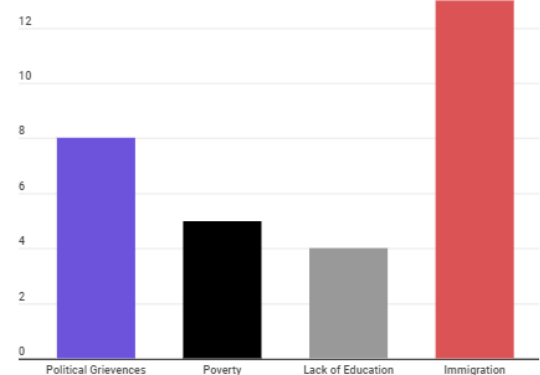
### **Motivation**

For this study, the motivations of the female terrorists were measured by analyzing the three P's: push, pull, and personal factors, as highlighted in the literature review section. This was chosen as the approach to allow for more characteristics to be accounted for, for strong analysis and understandings of female terrorists. For some of the profiles, any motivation is unknown and unaccounted for. The findings below may not be proportionate to the sample size.

**Push Factors** focus on structural root causes such as political grievances, lack of education, and immigration.

For **political grievances**, patterns of blaming countries such as the US for the mistreatment of others, were apparent. For instance, Aafia Siddiqui blamed the US for the suffering of all Muslims. Her studies at University also coincided with the Bosnian War which added fuel to that train of thought. She blamed the US for the suffering that occurred in the Bosnian war and inspired others to take up arms and support Bosnian Muslims. Siddiqui placed this anger and blame by turning to “jihad against America.”

**Push Factors**



Sadiqqi once explained in University that, “I’d be proud to be on the Most Wanted list because it would mean I’m doing something to help our Muslim brothers and sisters.”<sup>71</sup>

This was a clear push factor in her radicalization process.

Mediha Salkicevic, was one of a group of six Bosnian immigrants who financed ISIS fighters, and had Bosnian war grievances. During the war she got separated from her brother and mother. She outlined the pain she endured during the Bosnian war, in a letter to the U.S. District Judge Catherine Perry (see right), asking her to take those circumstances into consideration.<sup>72</sup>

Case: 15-cr-00049-CDP-DDN Doc. #: 427 Filed: 04/11/16 Page 1 of 1 PageID #: 2509

4-11-16 Hello Ms. Perry

RECEIVED  
APR 18 2016  
BY MAIL

I'm sorry if I bother you with this words. I pray before I decide to write letter to you. I don't remember if I ever write you in these 3 years being in jail. If I did then forgive me to bother. But since I wasn't in Federal building since September 5<sup>th</sup> 2017 I really don't know how system works and how often it should be there. I just want to make sure they don't lose my name in system and if possible to forget about me. I don't want to be forget. I'm sorry for my spelling and also it would like to use this chance and share some letters I received from principal of High School of my kids this copy from district newspapers about my daughter Leyla. Also this short story I wrote in 2016. I know you're busy with your job but I beg you please read this papers I'm sending to you. Because maybe these papers can make my case to finish faster. I'm in County Jail since February 2015 without conviction. I have 11 kids outside born and raise in Chicago 18-16-10-9 years old (now) when I was arrested they were 15-13-7-6. Also this picture of my family when I get hit by hand of people like what they trying to accuse me they said I was supporting. I never have problem with Law in Bosnia or here.

Ahlam Ahmad al-Tamimi is another example. She was living in Nabi Salah, north of Ramallah, in the West Bank during the Second Intifada. She initiated contact with the Qassam Brigades to join the resistance movement. Her push factor was the liberation of Palestine and refusal to recognize Israel's existence. Being motivated by such factors makes it difficult to measure remorse because the individual deems the target as evil and hence, their terrorist actions are justifiable to them. This coincides with Horgan's explanation (discussed in the literature review) of why terrorists are sometimes assumed to be psychopaths. For instance, in an interview with Hamas *Al-Aqsa TV*, Ahlam talked about the attack she perpetrated, “While I was on the bus and everybody was congratulating one another, they said on the radio that there had been a martyrdom attack at the Sbarro restaurant, and that three people were killed. I

<sup>71</sup> Jacobs, "The Woman ISIS Wanted Back."

<sup>72</sup> Letter to U.S. District Judge Catherine Perry, "Wls Terror Mom Letter."

admit that I was a bit disappointed because I had hoped for a larger toll. Yet when they said, ‘three dead,’ I said: ‘Allah be praised’... Two minutes later, they said on the radio that the number had increased to five. I wanted to hide my smile, but I just couldn’t.”<sup>73</sup> Ahlam



Ahmad al-Tamimi was politically motivated to liberate Palestine and felt that her acts of terror were justified.

Aqsa Mahmood, a notorious propagandist, and recruiter who was radicalized during the Syrian civil war and was very concerned about the violence, is another example. Jaelyn Young also complained about the treatment of Muslims in the United States and United Kingdom and was anti-American. When speaking to an undercover FBI about traveling to ISIS territory, she argued that the “US has a thick cloud of falsehoods”.<sup>74</sup> She also tweeted anti-US rhetoric and support of violence against Americans. In one of her tweets she wrote: "what makes me feel better after watching the news is that an akhi carried out an attack against US marines in TN! Alhamdulillah, the numbers of supporters are growing..."<sup>75</sup>

Kristina Morvai, the only non-jihadist in the sample, portrays extremist views that are closely linked with political motives. She is a member of Hungary’s far-right Jobbik party and is not shy about her anti- Semitism and extremist beliefs. She takes a nationalist approach and argues for a "Hungary for Hungarians". She’s made some public

<sup>73</sup> MEMRI, "Released Palestinian Terrorist Ahlam Tamimi."

<sup>74</sup> Counter Extremism Project, "Jaelyn Young."

<sup>75</sup> Apel, "Timeline: What We Know about Jaelyn Young."

controversial statements such as “Liberal-Bolshevik Zionists” should start thinking about “where to flee and where to hide” and in response to Israeli casualties in Gaza, she said, “the only way to talk to people like you is by assuming the style of Hamas. I wish all of you lice-infested, dirty murderers will receive Hamas’ ‘kisses.’”<sup>76</sup>

Regarding Hoda Muthana, it is difficult to conclude whether this was the initial push factor, but she propagated strong anti-US rhetoric. On Twitter, she called for violence against Americans on Memorial Day: “Americans wake up! Men and women altogether. You have much to do while you live under our greatest enemy, enough of your sleeping! Go on drive-bys and spill all of their blood or rent a big truck and drive all over them. Veterans, Patriot, Memorial etc...”<sup>77</sup> She also belittled those who didn’t support ISIS. In another tweet she wrote “Soooo many Aussies and Brits here. But where are the Americans, wake up u cowards.”<sup>78</sup> Shannon Maureen Conley told the FBI that, “[I am determined to defend] Muslims on the Muslim homeland against people who are trying to kill them,” and that she “would rather be in prison than do nothing.”<sup>79</sup> Hayat Boumedienne, while unclear if motivated by these beliefs, told the police when interrogated in 2010, ““when I saw the massacre of the innocents in Palestine, in Iraq, in Chetchna, in Afghanistan or anywhere the Americans sent their bombers, all that... well, who are the terrorists?”<sup>80</sup>

The limitations with determining political grievances as a motive for female terrorism is twofold: first, this sample is small and not representative. Second, it is

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<sup>76</sup> Counter Extremism Project, "Krisztina Morvai."

<sup>77</sup> Hall, "Gone Girl."

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Deam, "Colorado Woman's Quest."

<sup>80</sup> Cook, et al., "Deli Gunman's Wife."

unclear if this was the driving force or grievances that played a role in their radicalization. Were they taught anti-US rhetoric once they already joined or did they join because of these beliefs? Further research is required to understand the true role of state repression and political grievances as a determining push factor.

In this sample, thirteen females were characterized as either first- or second-generation **immigrants**. Aafia Siddiqui was originally from Pakistan and then got US citizenship. However, she later returned to Pakistan in 1993 to conduct research and where she ended up connecting with Al Qaeda. Aqsa Mahmood was not an immigrant herself, but her father was originally from Pakistan. Mediha lived in the US but was a Bosnian immigrant and Hoda Muthana's father is a Yemeni UN diplomat. Other examples are Asia Siddiqui who was originally from Saudi Arabia, Hayat Boumedienne whose parents were Algerian immigrants, Jasminka Ramic and Sedina Unkic Hodzic, both Bosnian immigrants, Rowaida El-Hassan, a Sudanese immigrant, Tashfeen Malik, who was originally from Pakistan, and Sharmeena and Shamima Begum both have Bangladeshi parents. While it is unclear whether Yusra Ismail was born in Somalia or the US, she is referred to as a Somalian-American woman. A Daily Mail article on Ismail highlighted US authorities' concern about young Somalian-Americans joining Islamic extremist groups, signaling that their split identity plays a role in their radicalization.<sup>81</sup>

From this sample alone it is unclear how or why immigration plays a role in motivation, however, immigration often coincided with the political grievances discussed

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<sup>81</sup> Hall, "Somali-American woman, 20, 'stole friend's passport.'"

above. Further analysis should seek to understand the role of immigration as a push factor and how closely tied it is with political grievances as a push factor.

Previous studies have found that **poverty** and a **lack of education** are not prominent factors amongst female terrorists and extremists as they are for males. In this sample, only five women seem to have been impoverished at some point in their life before radicalizing and this section will explore these characteristics.

Ariel Bradley grew up in a house of five and claimed to a friend that she grew up extremely impoverished. One of her friends explained that “you think of milk as this necessity that everyone has in their fridge, but they were so poor they didn't have milk.”<sup>82</sup> Jasminka Ramic's family declared bankruptcy in 2012, just three years before she was arrested. Ramic's only source of income was a monthly Social Security disability check of \$5. Mediha Salkicevic describes her widowed mother as someone who went door to door to offer chores for pay and raised her family "with no income or pension.”<sup>83</sup> Nicole Mansfield got pregnant at 15. Her daughter Triana posted on Facebook explaining: "My mother struggled to make ends meet and we often moved around... I never stayed in one place for long because my mother could never keep up with the bills.”<sup>84</sup> Lastly, Noelle Velentzas lived in various homeless shelters as a teenager including Jamaica, Islamic Circle of North America Relief Agency, Queens homeless shelter for a year.<sup>85</sup>

While poverty is a factor in those five women's lives, it is unclear how much of a factor it was on its own. These five cases do not confirm previous studies as it is not clear how socio-economic status played a role in some of the case studies.

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<sup>82</sup> Hall, "How One Young Woman Went From Fundamentalist Christian To ISIS Bride."

<sup>83</sup> Goudie, "Lemon Drops and Genocide."

<sup>84</sup> Warikoo, "From Michigan To a Violent Death in Syria."

<sup>85</sup> CBS New York, "Noelle Velentzas, Asia Siddiqui Accused Of Alleged Terror Plot In U.S."

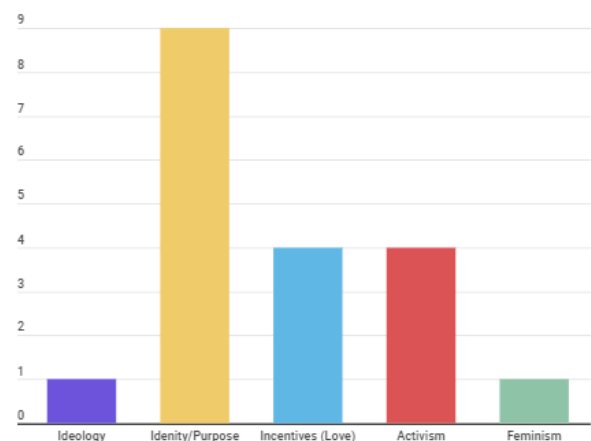


In this sample, a **lack of education** did not seem to be a prominent push factor either. Most finished high school, had secondary degrees, and some even PhDs. Aafia Siddiqui had a PhD from MIT, Jaelyn Young was the daughter of a police officer and Navy veteran, an honors student, and a chemistry major at University. Rowaida El-Hussein had a master's degree in pharmacy.

Only four women stand out: Shamima and Sharmeena Begum left for Syria at 15 and hence, did not complete high school, Colleen LaRose did not complete high school, and Ariel Bradley was a college dropout. However, Shamima and Sharmeena didn't graduate because they left to Syria at 15 years old. They may have finished high school otherwise. In this sample, it does not seem that a lack of education or career played a role in their turn to terrorism or extremism. However, this can be sample specific and not representative of female terrorists in general.

**Pull Factors** are aspects that make extremism and terrorism more appealing to the individual. In this sample I found pull factors such as ideology, identity/spiritual longing/belonging/purpose, incentives (mostly marriage and love), activism, and feminism. In broader terrorism studies, ideology seems to be a very clear factor in radicalization. In this sample, however, only Noelle Velentzas seems to have ideology as a prominent factor. She viewed Osama bin Laden and Abdullah Azzam as her "heroes"

**Pull Factors**



and believed Bin Laden's views were the same as her own. Noelle was inspired by other attacks in the US and used it as a blueprint for violent Jihad in the US.

Nine portray characteristics of seeking **identity/purpose**. Ariel Bradley was described as someone who constantly shifted her identity. Before converting to Islam, she was an atheist and a socialist. “Be it religion, be it a man, be it a marriage, be it a child, be it ISIS, Ariel was always looking for something to define herself, an identity to cling to.”<sup>86</sup> A friend of Bradley’s described her as someone who based her identity “..if she meets a guy that’s an atheist then she’s an atheist, falls into that for a year. Then the guy leaves and she meets somebody new, and it starts all over again...It seemed like whatever guy she was with, she would just crawl into his skin and kind of become him.”<sup>87</sup>

Colleen LaRose was also seeking fulfillment and purpose. When asked why she did what she did, she explained, “Love for my Prophet, love for my Ummah [community] and love for the brother that gave me the assignment...”<sup>88</sup> “I just loved my brothers so much, when they would tell me stuff, I would listen to them, no matter what...And I also was ... lost.”<sup>89</sup> Hoda Muthana sought out social media as a means to express herself. She grew up in a strict, sheltered home. She got her first phone when graduating high school and while Hoda’s brothers could have Facebook accounts, the women in the family were prohibited from having Facebook or other messaging apps to communicate with non-family members. Hoda’s father would check her phone to ensure she was obeying those rules.<sup>90</sup> Her rebellion took her to more extreme version of Islam. One journalist described

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<sup>86</sup> Hall, "How One Young Woman Went From Fundamentalist Christian To ISIS Bride."

<sup>87</sup> McMAH, "Ariel Bradley's Strange Transformation"

<sup>88</sup> Connor & Siegel, "Jihad Jane' Colleen LaRose Became a Terrorist for Love."

<sup>89</sup> Shiffman, "Special Report."

<sup>90</sup> Hall, "Gone Girl."

Hoda as “a young woman caught between two worlds, a child of immigrants frustrated by the restrictions they placed on her and her sister while watching her brothers seemingly do whatever they pleased. A person searching for the connections that her parents’ rules made it so hard to form. A place to belong, and a greater purpose — though the one she ultimately found was utterly misguided. Her tweets were an extension of herself, performing what she perceived as the best version of herself, optimizing herself for the unforgiving seductions of social media.”<sup>91</sup> A friend also explained that Twitter was Hoda’s alter ego; “what she lacked in her personality she would make up for on Twitter.”<sup>92</sup>

Jamie Paulin Ramirez was also someone constantly looking for an identity. Her own mother described her as a lonely and insecure woman and that she “never really liked herself.”<sup>93</sup> She immersed herself in different cultures and married and divorced multiple times. Eventually Ramirez moved in with her mother so she can save money, but they often argued about religion. She was “looking for a reason to leave.”<sup>94</sup>

Lisa Smith was on a spiritual and identity search. “The pressure of life got to me. There was so much pressure to look good... and there were no morals, nothing solid. I was all airy-fairy on the outside, but inside I knew there was something wrong,” she explained. She self-proclaimed herself as a party girl looking for meaning. She shared in one interview: “I didn’t have much grounding in the Catholic faith. I was looking for answers - why we were here, what was our purpose in life. I just knew we couldn’t be on

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<sup>91</sup> Hall, “An Alabama “ISIS Bride” Wants To Come Home.”

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Johnson & Robbins, “U.S. Woman Held in Plot Is Released.”

<sup>94</sup> Shiffman, “Special Report.”

this Earth for no reason...I went through the whole spirituality phase, Buddhism and stuff, and nothing was registering. Fairies, angels, reiki, the works - and then I was thinking that there was no god, just a god consciousness.”<sup>95</sup> She turned to Islam and became obsessed with studying the Koran. This was after her contradicting beliefs about Muslims: “‘I'd see them and think: bombers”, she said.<sup>96</sup>

Nicole Lynn Mansfield’s old roommate believed that Mansfield turned to Islam because “It was a peaceful religion to her, and it gave her purpose as she was trying to find herself.”<sup>97</sup> Mansfield’s parents got divorced when she was young, and she got pregnant as a teenager. She dropped out of (although she did get her GED and college degree later), eventually married but then divorced, and was looking for purpose.

Samantha Lewthwaite, although raised Christian, was introduced to Islam by her Muslim neighbors. She turned to them for familial connection after her parents divorced. She later converted to Islam at the age of 17. She then radicalized to the extremist Islam, highlighted in her love poem to Osama Bin Laden, where she proclaimed: “my love for you is like no other.”<sup>98</sup>

Shamima Begum also portrayed factors of belonging and connection. When explaining why she traveled to Syria at the age of 15, she shared that she liked how the Islamic State “showed that you can go [to Syria] and they'll take care of you. You can have your own family, do anything.”<sup>99</sup> Lastly, for Safaa Boular, family and identity seem to strongly characterize her path.. Both her mother and sister, Mina Dich and Rizlaine

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<sup>95</sup> Morgan & Brady, “Who is Lisa Smith?”

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Preston, “Michigan Woman Killed in Syria War.”

<sup>98</sup> Siddique, “British Fugitive Samantha Lewthwaite Wrote 'love Poem'.”

<sup>99</sup> Milligan, ‘Full Transcript.’

Boular, were part of Britain's first all-female ISIS terrorist cell and Safaa began to radicalize when her mother showed signs of Jihadist support.<sup>100</sup>

In exploring pull factors for joining terrorist and extremist groups, this sample accounts most for characteristics of searching for identity, purpose, and meaning. Perhaps further analysis can explain if this is a meaningful motivation and characteristic of females.

**Incentives** for romance were found in this sample. Being incentivized by a man tends to be a large topic of discussion in the existing literature regarding female terrorists while for men, the incentives are often monetary. In this sample, more than half of the case studies accounted for some sort of relationship with a man. The question then became to what extent their male partners played in their radicalization and recruitment. Did they influence the females or did the females influence the males? Did they meet them during the radicalization process or when they already joined the group?

#### **No relation**

This study found that while many did have romantic partners in the picture, some had no role in their radicalization. For instance, Aafia Siddiqui was married to a Pakistani, man named Mohammed Amjad Khan. Khan stated that he stopped bringing colleagues to his home because Siddiqui would "only to talk about them converting to Islam."<sup>101</sup> The couple eventually moved to Pakistan together but got divorced shortly after. A few months later, Siddiqui married Khalid Sheikh Mohammed's (KSM) nephew, Ammar al-Baluchi. In her case, she tried to radicalize her first husband, and when that failed, she married someone that already had the same concept of faith that she did.

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<sup>100</sup> Counter Extremism Project, "Safaa Boular."

<sup>101</sup> Jacobs, "The woman ISIS wanted back."

While she did have two romantic partners, it is important to recognize the lack of influence they had on her role in Al Qaeda. Similarly, Ahlam Ahmad al-Tamimi, got engaged to her cousin Nizar Tamimi who killed an Israeli settler in the West Bank and was serving a life sentence. However, they only got engaged after Tamimi went to prison for bombing Sbarro pizzeria in Jerusalem. She too had a romantic partner with a terrorist, yet it did not influence her behavior or terrorist acts. For Tamimi, the engagement and marriage were a ‘symbol of resistance’: “I resisted the occupation with my love and my engagement to this prisoner. Through the engagement, the prisoner tells the occupier that his life continues.”<sup>102</sup>

Other case studies also portrayed characteristics of romance. However, an analysis of their rhetoric concludes that in their cases, love was not an incentive for radicalization. Hoda Muthana, Shamima Begum, Jamie Paulin Ramirez, Samantha Lewthwaite, Heather Elizabeth Coffman, Rowaida El- Hassan, and Jaelyn Young, are some examples of those findings. For them, their partners were not their introductory point to terrorist groups, and in some cases, the females influence even influenced their partners. Hoda Muthana clarified this when speaking to a journalist: “tell the West we didn't come here because we wanted to be jihadi wives. If that were the case you'd see most of us trying to go back. Who would risk everything they know and own to have a marriage that's span isn't guaranteed for the next day.”<sup>103</sup>

It is important to further analyze the impact of romance on female terrorists and extremists. As this sample highlights, many women did have romantic links to men who

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<sup>102</sup> Al Jazeera, "Wedding on Hold: Palestine, Politics and Prison."

<sup>103</sup> Hall, "An Alabama "ISIS Bride" Wants To Come Home."

were radicalized, however, it is important to recognize their lack of influence on them as a pull factor.

### Love as an incentive

This does not mean that romance was not an incentive at all. Aqsa Mahmood is believed to have gotten radicalized online by Adeel Ulhaq, a British citizen who was eventually imprisoned for facilitating a young boy's travel to Syria. Mahmood's parents believe that Ulhaq persuaded her to join



**UmmHussainBritāniya** @UmmHu... 2h  
Im proud my husband was killed by the biggest enemy of Allah, may Allah be pleased with him, and i will never ever love anyone but him <3

ISIS by promising her a hand in marriage. Ariel Bradley married Yasin Mohamad, a British Jihadist fighter for ISIS, whom she met online. The couple travelled to the Middle East together. Before she met Mohamad, she met a religious Muslim man who rejected her romantically. It is believed that that man influenced her to look into Islam.<sup>104</sup> Haleema Mustafa met and married Ikar Mao and they traveled to Turkey together. Mustafa's family suspected that Mao was interested in ISIS and had a role in her radicalization. Sally Jones was also influenced by Junaid Hussein, who was killed in a US drone strike. She tweeted her support for him when he was killed (see right).<sup>105</sup> Shannon Maureen Conley is also presumed to have traveled to Syria for the purpose of marrying a Tunisian ISIS fighter.

An analysis of romance as incentive for the women in this sample highlights that some join for a partner, while others either influence their partners, or meet them after

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<sup>104</sup> Hall, "How One Young Woman Went from Fundamentalist Christian To ISIS Bride."

<sup>105</sup> Counter Extremism Project, "Sally Jones."

their radicalization. However, because this sample size is non-representative, the findings are exploratory and not confirmatory.

**Activism** and **feminism** are another two pull factors found in this sample. It seems that activism somewhat ties into the push factor of state repression and political motives. Krisztina Morvai, for instance, believes she is a human rights activist and “not your typical fascist or Nazi career.” In her anti-Israel and pro-Palestine sentiment, she told a journalist who asked her the difference between the Jobbik party and WW2, “go to Israel and ask what the difference is between Israel and the Nazis.”<sup>106</sup> Morvai was, in fact, the Hungarian representative to the United Nation's Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDA).

Ariel Bradley grew up Christian. She denounced christianity and all religions and instead turned to atheism and focused on socialist activism and feminism, fighting for teachers’ rights, fair housing, and racial equality. She also began working to help the homeless. The photo on the right shows her protesting in Chattanooga.<sup>107</sup> It is unclear if Bradley saw her role in ISIS as activism or if it was just part of her identity at the time that disappeared with everything else she fought for.



For Nicole Lynn Mansfield, activism is a visible characteristic as well. She began posting Facebook photos of the Egyptian uprising during the Arab Spring as well as photos of the Syrian conflict. She also attended a rally in Washington in support of Egyptian activists aiming to overthrow President Hosni Mubarak during the Arab

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<sup>106</sup> The Contrarian Hungarian, "Krisztina Morvai: "Nazi Barbie"

<sup>107</sup> McMAH, “Ariel Bradley's Strange Transformation.”



Spring.<sup>108</sup> Mansfield allegedly fought with the Assad regime opposition rebels and was killed doing so.

Ahlam Ahmad al-Tamimi also truly believed she was advocating for resistance and liberation. She questioned: “Why are we considered to be terrorists? Why am I, Ahlam, considered to be a terrorist, when I am part of a movement for freedom and national liberation? I am part of a resistance movement that strives for liberation.”<sup>109</sup> This highlights the discussion above about rationalizing terrorist acts when it is believed to be justified.

In this sample characteristics of **feminism** is not prominent. Colleen LaRose, when asked why she joined ISI did share “also I think I did it for pride. Sisters are never given assignments like the one I was given. I felt my brother had enough confidence and trust in me that he honored me by giving me the assignment.”<sup>110</sup> However, it is unclear if she only said this in retrospect and if it is inextricably linked to identity and purpose pull factors rather than a valid pull factor on its own.

**Personal Factors** looks at what makes the specific individual more vulnerable to radicalization and recruitment. It tends to focus on trauma, psychological disorders, and personality traits. In this sample personal factors such as a history of drinking and drugs,



<sup>108</sup> Preston, “Michigan Woman Killed in Syria War.”

<sup>109</sup> MEMRI, “Released Palestinian Terrorist Ahlam Tamimi.”

<sup>110</sup> Connor & Siegel, “‘Jihad Jane’ Colleen Larose.”

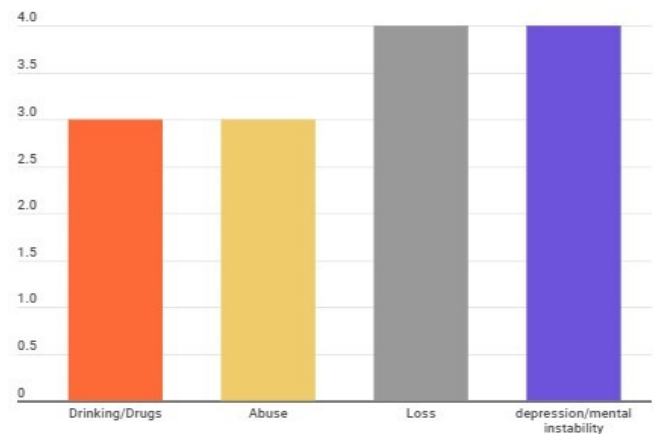
sexual abuse (rape/molestation), depression and mental instability, as well as loss, were found.

Ariel Bradley, Colleen LaRose, and Lisa Smith, all have a history with **drugs, drinking, or partying**. Before converting, Bradley experimented with all sorts of drugs and was a heavy

drinker. Friends explained that at one festival ‘She did so much acid that she collapsed during the Radiohead concert.’<sup>111</sup> Colleen LaRose faced some dark days before she became Jihad Jane. She turned to prostitution, drinking, and drugs, including meth. In a special report for Reuters, LaRose’ journey is explained as shedding her old life; “46 years scarred by rapes, prostitution, drugs and failed marriages - for this new one full of promise.”<sup>112</sup> Lisa Smith, after her military service, turned to booze and drugs. She described herself as a “party girl who had tried cannabis and ecstasy.”<sup>113</sup>

While these are not necessarily precursors to terrorism on its own, these are personal factors that may make an individual more susceptible to radicalization. While it is unclear if such factors are more predominant amongst female terrorists and extremist than males, or if it is of significance, these are factors that have been found and hence, explored.

### Personal Factors



<sup>111</sup> Hall, “How One Young Woman Went From Fundamentalist Christian To Isis Bride.”

<sup>112</sup> Shiffman, “Special Report.”

<sup>113</sup> Brady, “Who is Lisa Smith?”

In this sample **abuse** encompassed sexual molestation and rape as well. The three women that have a history of abuse are Asia Siddiqui, Colleen LaRose, Hayat Boumedienne. Asia Siddiqui was dating a man but was saving herself for marriage. However, the man she was with did not accept that choice and raped her instead.<sup>114</sup> At eight years old, Colleen LaRose's father began to rape her and her sister for years. Her father, Richard LaRose, confessed to raping her when confronted by LaRose's counselor. LaRose took the phone and yelled at her dad: "Look what you've done to me! You did this to me! It's your fault! Why? Why?"<sup>115</sup> Hayat Boumedienne suffered abuse in foster care after her mother died when she was a young girl. She told a detective, "I was placed in care at the age of 12, because I did not accept the speed with which my father remarried after the death of my mother. I changed carers numerous times because I was beaten often."<sup>116</sup> How exactly abuse characterizes these women is unclear at the preliminary stage.

Asia Siddiqui, Colleen LaRose, Heather Elizabeth Coffman, and Lisa Smith portray factors of **depression** and **mental instability**. Siddiqui was diagnosed with major depressive disorder and social anxiety and sought psychiatric treatment in 2014.<sup>117</sup> However, she presumably became depressed after she was raped. Colleen LaRose was also sent to a hospital for psychiatric treatment after her father raped her.<sup>118</sup> In *United States of America vs. Heather Elizabeth Coffman*, Coffman's history of mental health was described as "concerning."<sup>119</sup> She also self-diagnosed herself with various disorders.

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<sup>114</sup> "United States of America v Noelle Velentzas, Defense Sentencing Memorandum."

<sup>115</sup> Shiffman, "Special Report."

<sup>116</sup> Farmer & Walton, "Paris Shooter's Girlfriend."

<sup>117</sup> "United States of America v Noelle Velentzas, Defense Sentencing Memorandum." pg. 7

<sup>118</sup> Shiffman, "Special Report."

<sup>119</sup> "United States of America v Heather Elizabeth Coffman, Defendant, Position on Sentencing."

Lastly, Lisa Smith found herself in a depression after a decade of military service which led her to drinking and drugs.

Another noticeable characteristic is **loss**: Jamie Pauline, Mediha Salkicevic, Hayat Boumedienne, and Colleen LaRose, had lost loved ones prior to joining a terrorist group. Jamie Pauline Ramirez's sister died of cancer, which resulted in her becoming embittered with God, despite being raised a Methodist.<sup>120</sup> Mediha Salkicevic lost her father at six and her brother was killed in the Bosnian war. In the letter she sent to the US District Judge, she included a picture saying: "picture of my family whom get killed by hand of people like what they trying to accuse me they said I was supporting."<sup>121</sup> Hayat Boumedienne also lost a parent at a young age and her father raised his seven children. Lastly, Colleen LaRose lost both her father and brother which drove her to attempted suicide.<sup>122</sup>

While loss and other personal factors may not directly lead to radicalization on its own, coupled with other factors, such vulnerabilities may characterize female terrorists and extremists.

The 'three Ps' are interconnected and hence, it is difficult to determine what is the driving motivations for female terrorists and extremists. Many of the females account for numerous pushes, pull, and personal factors that often overlapped. If some of those factors were taken away from their history, would they still have turned down the same path or does it need to be the perfect recipe of characteristics? Perhaps a more comprehensive study with in-depth interviews could answer these questions.

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<sup>120</sup> Shiffman, "Special Report."

<sup>121</sup> Goudie, et al., "Lemon Drops and Genocide."

<sup>122</sup> Fox News, "Jihad Jane."

## Gender

### **Krisztina Morvai: “Nazi Barbie” in US Diplomatic Cables**

Demand Jordan extradites  
celebrity terrorist Ahlam Tamimi,  
the Sbarro massacre  
bomber, now

**Mantha Lewthwaite Today: Where Is the  
White Widow Now?**

**'I was just a housewife', says British schoolgirl who ran off  
to join IS**

## **Lady al Qaeda: The World's Most Wanted Woman**

While a gendered framework is important in terrorism studies, it's important to recognize how stereotypes may paint a skewed image of female terrorists and extremists. An analysis of these case studies highlights both the media and the women themselves utilizing gender stereotypes. The names given to these by the media usually focus on the fact that they are women, sensationalizing their actions. Some examples include: Aafia Saddiqui known as 'Lady Al- Qaeda', Ahlam Ahmad al-Tamimi referred to as the 'celebrity terrorist' and Sally Jones as the 'white Widow'. Krisztina Morvai was called the 'Nazi barbie', and Sally Jones, the 'white widow'. Even the term "ISIS brides" adds to the misconceptions about female. When looking at the profiles of male terrorists, however, their other names are just different versions or different spellings of their original names. For instance, the TED database has more than 20 different names that the

Abdelmalek Droukdel, an AQIM leader is known as. All, however, are different versions of his name or other names he was referred to. None are names to signify his gender.<sup>123</sup>

When the media utilized gendered names it leads to inaccurate portrayals of female terrorists and extremists, which ultimately may drive groups to recognize a strategic advantage and propaganda value of women. Trivializing their actions through these names may also result in the findings above being missed.

Furthermore, when analyzing the social media usernames for Twitter, Facebook, or Tumblr, it seems that the women were consciously aware of the strategic advantage they would have if they portray themselves in a gendered frame. For instance, Ariel Bradley used the username ‘LadyAppleSeed’, a very non- threatening persona. Jaelyn Young used @1 \_Modest \_Woman on one of her accounts, and Kim Anh Vo utilized domains such as Miss. Bones,” and “Kitty Lee”, clearly including feminine names in her username.

Before Krisztina Morvai became MEP, she was described as “the kind of woman that any political party would like on their ticket: an attractive blonde working mum, who juggles a high-flying legal career with bringing up three children...” This description painted her positively simply by focusing on her gender. Ahmad al-Tamimi utilized gender by disguising herself as a young Israeli girl, non-threatening and trustworthy in Jerusalem, and able to access a place her male counterparts could not. LaRose was considered an asset and recruited because of her gender and physical traits. She sent a message online, pledging to “blend in with many people... to achieve what is in my heart” by utilizing her blonde hair, white skin, and green eyes.<sup>124</sup> Shamima Begum used

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<sup>123</sup> Counterterrorism Project, “Abdelmalek Droukdel.”

<sup>124</sup> Shiffman, "Special Report."

the conventional portrayal of ISIS women's role as housewives to her advantage. She said, "They don't have any evidence against me doing anything dangerous," she said. "I was just a housewife."<sup>125</sup> She took advantage of the stereotype and used it as her defense for traveling to Syria.

Understanding the characteristics of female terrorists and extremists is important if only to shed light on how stereotypes and false gendered assumptions offer these women and groups an advantage. If the characteristics of these women are misconceived, it may offer groups an incentive to recruit, utilize, and take advantage of females.

## CONCLUSION

### **Further implications and recommendation**

As this was a preliminary and exploratory study, the aim was to analyze characteristics and themes of female terrorists and extremists using the CEP's Terrorists and Extremists Database as a starting point and through multiple other sources, saturate the findings with content analysis. Multiple themes, factors, and characteristics of female terrorists have been discussed in this research study which expanded the existing literature by not limiting the sample to meet specific requirements. While no conclusion can be derived from this analysis, it can be a tool for further, more comprehensive studies.

### **Limitations and future research**

The primary limitation of this study was the data collection and sample size. Because of the sensitivity surrounding terrorism, the safety issues, and the hard to reach nature of the sample, no interviews, or surveys were conducted, and no primary data was

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<sup>125</sup> Sky News, "IS Bride Shamima Begum Full Transcript."

utilized. While secondary interviews were used, analysis was limited to the information at hand. This dataset was used because of its variety; its cross sectional in region, roles, motivations, etc. Yet, it is a small and non-representative sample. Furthermore, 40/41 case studies are affiliated with jihadist groups which limits the findings to mainly jihadist ideology.

Future research should choose larger, cross sectional samples that include jihadist and non-jihadist groups, with primary data collection to determine more conclusive results. Future studies should attempt to analyze what factors play the most significant roles in motivating female terrorists and extremists and if they differ between groups. This will be necessary to determine how to counter the radicalization of females and implement sound policies.



**Appendix A: Case Studies from the Counter Extremism Project Terrorist and Extremist Database (TED) as of November 10, 2020**



**Aafia Siddiqui  
Al Qaeda**



**Ahlam Ahmad al-  
Tamimi- Hamas**



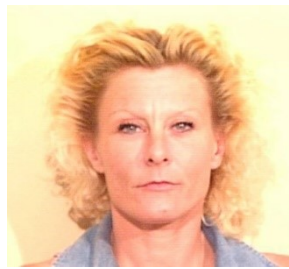
**Aqsa Mahmood  
ISIS**



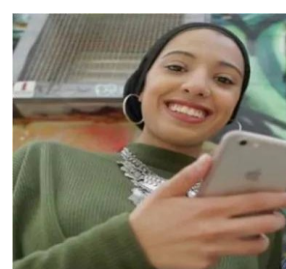
**Ariel Bradley  
ISIS**



**Asia Siddiqui  
Al Qaeda**



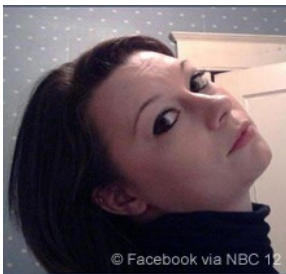
**Colleen LaRose  
ISIS**



**Haleema Mustafa  
ISIS**



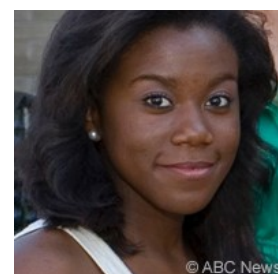
**Hayat Boumeddiene  
ISIS**



**Heather E. Coffman  
ISIS**



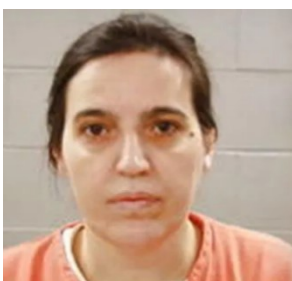
**Hoda Muthana  
ISIS**



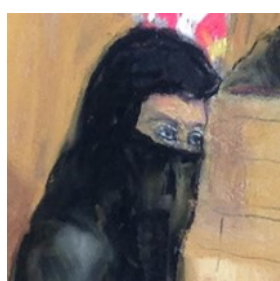
**Jaelyn Young  
ISIS**



**Jaime Pauline  
Ramirez – Al Qaeda**



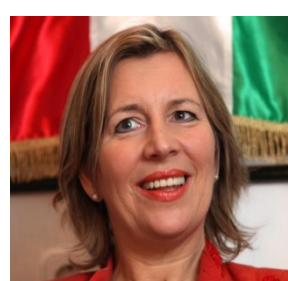
**Jasminka Ramic  
ISIS**



**Keonna Thomas  
ISIS**



**Kim Anh Vo  
ISIS**



**Krisztina Morvai  
Jobbik**



**Lisa Smith**  
**ISIS**



**Mediha Salkicevic**  
**ISIS**



**Nicole Lynn**  
**Mansfield- Al Qaeda**



**Noelle Velentzas**  
**ISIS**



**Rawdah Abdisalaam**  
**ISIS**



**Rowaida El-Hassan**  
**ISIS**



**Safaa Boular**  
**ISIS**



**Sally Jones**  
**ISIS**



**Samantha Lewthwaite**  
**Al-Shabaab**



**Sedina Unkcic Hodzic**  
**Al Qaeda**



**Shamima Begum**  
**ISIS**



**Sharmeena Begum**  
**ISIS**



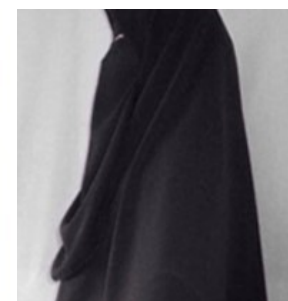
**Shannon Maureen**  
**Conley - ISIS**



**Tafsheen Malik**  
**ISIS**



**Yusra Ismail**  
**ISIS**



**Umm Radwa**  
**ISIS**

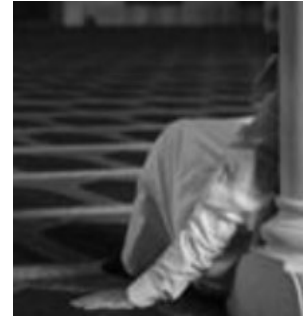




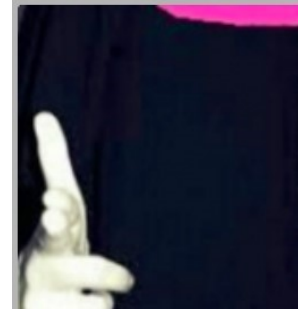
**Amal  
ISIS**



**Ana Eashaa  
ISIS**



**Azz Dine  
ISIS**



**Bint Crackers  
ISIS**



**Hallie Sheikh  
ISIS**



**Hass Coast  
ISIS**



**GreenBirdofDabiq  
ISIS**

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## Education

**Johns Hopkins University**, Washington, DC December 2020  
*Master of Arts, Global Security Studies*

**University of California Riverside**, Riverside, CA June 2018  
*Bachelor of Arts, Sociology* University Honors

- Study Abroad: AIFS Greece| Athens, Greece Summer 2015

## Professional Experience

**Counterterrorism and Intelligence Analyst Intern**, Extremism Alternate Team Leader June 2020- Present  
*The Counterterrorism Group*

- Operate with the Extremism team with individual focus on CENTCOM and AFRICOM
- Track respective regional terrorist organizations through current events
- Monitor social media (SOCINT) of respective regions and terrorist organizations as well as relevant hashtags
- Utilize intelligence analytic skills to monitor, assess, and report on open-source (OSINT) strategic and operational intelligence pertaining to counterterrorism
- Provide BLUF reports on current situations pertaining to Extremism team reports
- Involved in the interview process of potential new interns
- 3 hour weekly terrorist watch shift

**Property Manager**, Remote January 2020-Present  
*Airbnb*

- Operating, marketing, and hosting an event and corporate retreat estate
- Utilizing interpersonal, hospitality, and communication skills
- Responsible for maintaining the property, before, during, and after guest stays
- In charge of the cleaning crew, landscaper, expenses, and property bills

**Foreign Policy Intern**, Washington, DC November 2019-May 2020  
*American Jewish Committee (AJC)*

- Wrote and edited key briefings for senior leadership in preparation for meetings with high level diplomats
- Attended at least one think tank event each week and wrote over 10 memos for AJC experts in the field
- Worked with senior directors on research for potential new board members
- Was invited by AJC senior leadership to attend high level briefings with the FBI and on the Hill

**Community Service Officer**, Riverside, CA January- June 2018  
*UC Riverside Police Department*

- Worked graveyard shifts, 10 p.m.- 4 a.m. patrolling different beats and secured the buildings
- Memorized more than 40 radio codes to effectively communicate with police officers in high-stress situations
- Acted as the 'eyes and ears of the police department'

**Editor**, Riverside, CA September 2015- August 2016  
*Audeamus- UC Wide Honors Journal*

- Edited more than three submissions every week
- Attended weekly team meetings and brainstormed the theme for the year

## Publications

**CTG Executive Summary**  
Egypt's #MeToo Movement October 2020

**CTG Analysis and Intelligence Report (AIR)**  
Alt-right Exploitation of the Internet August 2020

**CTG Executive Summary****'Boko Haram Recruiting Child Soldiers'**

August 2020

**CTG Analysis and Intelligence Report (AIR)****'Exploiting the Israeli- Palestinian Conflict: The Rise of Violent Extremism'**

July 2020

**Washington Jewish Week:****'Is the Coronavirus coughing up a new reality in the Middle East?'**

March 25, 2020

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**Research****UCR Honors Capstone Project, "A Literature Review on Female Serial Killing: Examining Gendered****Features of the Crime"** <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6qk0h8xy>

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**Honors and Awards****The Counterterrorism Group (CTG) Director's Award for Team Excellence, CTG**

September 2020

**UC Riverside Police Association Scholarship, UCR Police Department**

June 2018

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**Licenses and Certifications****FEMA, National Incident Management System (NIMS)**

Issued May 2020

**FEMA, FEMA Foundational & Security Awareness**

Issued May 2020

**Civilian Response to Active Shooter Events Instructor,**

Issued June, 2020

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**Core Competencies****Skills:** Analytical skills, OSINT, SOCINT, Research writing and qualitative research, Memo style writing, Teamwork, Time management, Interpersonal skills, APA, Chicago, and MLA style manuals; Microsoft Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Outlook; Dedoose software**Languages:** English [Native]; Yiddish [Native]; Hebrew [Beginner]